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ABSTRACT

To determine whether gender is a powerful influence on perceived characteristics, a videotape of an infant labeled as either a boy or a girl was shown to 101 male and 89 female college students in introductory psychology classes. After watching the videotape, subjects completed a rating scale assessing the infant's characteristics. When labeled female, the baby was rated as significantly less sturdy (that is, as being softer, more finely featured, smaller, and more delicate) than when labeled male. In addition, female students rated the baby as having a better temperament (as being more relaxed, cuddly, easy going, and cheerful) than did males, regardless of gender label. Results suggested that gender of both infant and rater influenced perceptions, but on different dimensions. (Author/RH)

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The Effect of Gender on Adult Perceptions of Infant Behavior

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Abstract

The Effect of Gender on Adult Perceptions of Infant Behavior

A videotape of an infant was shown to 101 males and 89 females, with the infant described as either a boy or a girl. After watching the videotape, subjects completed a rating scale assessing the infant's characteristics. When labeled female, the baby was rated as significantly less "sturdy" (softer, more finely featured, littler, and more delicate) than when labeled male. Additionally, females rated the baby as having a better temperament (more relaxed, cuddly, easy going, and cheerful) than did males, regardless of whether it was labeled male or female. Results suggest that gender of both infant and rater influence perceptions, but on different dimensions.

The Effect of Gender on Adult Perceptions of Infant Behavior

The gender of an infant appears to be one of the major determinants of how an adult perceives or interacts with that infant. The importance of an infant's gender is highlighted by a previous study's finding that 80% of the initial questions about a neonate concern the gender of the baby, not the health of the infant or mother (Intons-Peterson & Reddel, 1984).

Previous studies investigating the influence of a child's gender on adult reactions to the child's behavior have yielded mixed results (eg. Rubin, Provenzano, & Luria, 1974; Stern & Hildebrandt, 1984). In a number of studies, both the gender of the adult observer and the gender of the infant influenced perceptions of the infant (Condry & Condry, 1976; Meyer & Sobieszek, 1972; Seavey & Katz, 1975). The bulk of the published studies which have documented the effects of gender appeared in the literature in the mid-1970's, while a more recent article (Stern & Hildebrandt, 1984) reported two studies in which there were no differences in perceptions of infants as a function of gender. The purpose of the present study is to examine the effects of both the infant's gender label and the gender of the rater on perceptions of infant behavior to determine whether gender continues to be a powerful influence on perceived characteristics.

Method

The subjects consisted of 101 males and 89 females, all of whom were students in introductory psychology classes. Subjects were shown a 10 minute videotape of a seven month old female

infant, and were told either that the infant was a baby girl named Meghan, or a baby boy named Brian. There were 40 males and 49 females in the "male baby" condition, and 61 males and 40 females in the "female baby" condition. The baby was dressed in a diaper and a white tee shirt, and background colors and toys were selected to eliminate cues about the baby's gender. After watching the videotape, subjects were given a questionnaire developed by Rubin, Provenzano, and Luria (1974), consisting of 18 pairs of characteristics. Subjects were asked to rate the baby on an 11 point scale for each of these 18 dimensions and to indicate their own age, sex, and year in college. Following completion of the questionnaire, subjects were debriefed and were informed of the purposes of the study.

Results

In a factor analysis of the baby rating scale, three clear factors were identified. These were labeled "sturdiness", which included the characteristics firm, large featured, big, and hardy; "temperament", which consisted of relaxed, cuddly, easy going, and cheerful; and "responsiveness", which was composed of excitable, active, sociable, noisy, alert, and friendly. A 2x2 analysis of variance was conducted, with levels consisting of sex of rater and gender label of baby. For the sturdiness factor, there was a significant main effect for gender label of baby, $F(1,186)=6.32$, $p<.05$. The "female" baby was rated as less sturdy (softer, more finely featured, littler, and more delicate) than was the "male" baby. For the second factor, temperament, there was a significant main effect for sex of rater, $F(1,186)=7.59$, $p<.01$. Females rated the baby as having a better temperament

(more relaxed, cuddly, easy going, and cheerful) than did the male raters. There was no significant main effect or interaction for the third factor, responsiveness.

Analyses were also conducted for each of the individual items comprising the baby rating scale. Several significant differences were found for sex of rater. Males rated the baby as significantly more nervous, $F(1,186)=8.36$, $p<.005$, than did the female subjects. Though not statistically significant, males also had a tendency to rate the baby as weaker, $F(1,186)=3.65$, $p<.06$. There was a highly significant sex difference in raters' perceptions of the baby's appetite, with females perceiving the baby to be a better eater, $F(1,184)=21.30$, $p<.0001$. Female raters perceived the baby as more cuddly, $F(1,186)=8.13$, $p<.005$, and more sociable, $F(1, 186)=7.93$, $p<.01$ than did male raters.

Regardless of whether the rater was male or female, the baby was described as significantly more delicate when labeled female than when labeled male, $F(1,186)=9.01$, $p<.005$.

In rating the size of the baby's features, there was a significant baby gender X sex of rater interaction, $F(1,185)=6.16$, $p<.05$. Females rated the "female" baby being the most finely featured, followed by male subjects, who saw virtually no difference between the size of the features of the male or female labeled baby. Female subjects perceived the "male" baby as having the largest features.

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that perceptions of infant behavior continue to be influenced by both the gender label of

the baby and the gender of the rater. In fact, several of the findings in this study were very similar to those of the Rubin et al. (1974) study, which reported that female babies were rated as softer, more finely featured, and littler than were male babies. In general, it seems that judgments which are highly dependent upon appearance, such as those comprising the "sturdiness" factor, are more heavily influenced by the gender label of the infant. In contrast, temperament characteristics were more influenced by the gender of the rater, regardless of whether the infant was labeled male or female.

It is interesting that the difference which reached greatest statistical significance was the dimension of "good eater/poor eater", which the subjects had no opportunity to directly assess. The videotape did not portray any feeding scenes. Consequently, this dimension is likely to be the one about which subjects had the least information, yet responded to the most differently. Perhaps ambiguous situations prompt males and females to rely on their own stereotypes of baby behavior, which appear to be quite different for males and females.

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